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The Perfume Rebellion

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The Perfume Rebellion

by Don Yoder

Speech, Sr.

THE SUNLIGHT flamed through the church window and hit me square in the eyes. I squirmed in the pew, trying to wriggle out of that spotlight, but it wasn't any use. No matter how I twisted and turned that shaft burned right through me.

"Sit still!" Grandma sternly whispered in my ear. She was close, her heavy perfume forbidding me to get a deep breath. A large greyhound brooch sagged at the cleavage of her dress. It was the one I had given her (despite Mom's objections) last Christmas. Now I cursed myself for that moment of weakness. The rhinestones and glass diamonds caught the sunlight and threw it into my eyes with every asthmatic breath Grandma breathed into my face.

I grimaced, straightened, and turned full front to appease Grandma's scolding, squeezing my eyes closed so as not to be blinded. It wasn't fair. I mean, that stained glass window was supposed to keep out the sun. What was the use of having all those pictures of saints and Jesus being nice to people if they went and let the sun blind a boy? The chip of missing glass was right at the tip of Jesus' outstretched hand. He was pointing at me and smiling, and the sun was blinding me. Dave sat next to me; the light didn't bother him. It just wasn't fair. There was only one thing to do.

"Change places with me," I whispered at Dave.

"What?" Dave looked up from the picture he was drawing on the back of an offering envelope.

"I said, change places with me!"

"Huh-uh," and he turned back to his picture.

"C'mon, Dave. You sit over here next to Grandma. I want to sit there for a while. C'mon!"

"I don wanna."

I wasn't used to being defied by my little brother, and it made me mad. I squinted against the brilliance and jabbed my elbow into Dave's rib cage. If he wasn't going to be blinded, he could at least be bruised a little. He screwed up his face and filled his lungs with air as if to start crying, but I dug my elbow in a little harder, at the same time whispering, "You better keep quiet or Grandma will take you outside and paddle you."

My stern advice didn't have quite the desired effect. It kept him from crying all right; instead he started to hit me with all the strength his four-year old arms could muster.

A couple of years older than Dave, and lots stronger, I knew I could beat him up. He should have known better than to start a fight with me, especially when I was mad. I had just started my slaughter when that familiar fog of perfume grabbed my lungs again and a wiry hand grabbed the back of my neck.

"Come on, let's go—Now!" The intensity of her whisper completely subdued any plans of rebellion that I might have had. Besides the vise-like grip on my neck and the refusal of my lungs to breathe that perfumed air left me in no position to resist.

Every eye in the place was looking straight at me as we rose and threaded our way down the long pew. I tripped over the shoe of an old man who was slow to retract his long legs from under the pew in front of him. A chuckle rose in the air. Our progress down the aisle was marked by a million pairs of eyes.

My face flamed in anger and I would have loudly cursed them all if Grandma's grip hadn't been tight on my neck. I hadn't wanted to come to this stupid place. Every Sunday I had to dress up in a hand-me-down suit from my cousin, with sleeves that were too long and pants that made my legs itch. I had to put on a tie that choked my neck and shoes that

pinched my feet. And for what! So I could be blinded and scolded and humiliated—and probably spanked. One thing for sure, I was never coming back to this place again!

Once outside, Grandma shook me by the shoulders and scolded me good. I can't remember all that she said, but it was something about the church being sacred and what I did was bad and God didn't like it and I was never to do it again and why didn't I try being good once in a while. Then she told me I had to go to the car and wait there until church was over. She frowned at me, turned, and left.

Well, I felt pretty bad by the time the lecture was over. I would much rather have been spanked than have Grandma scold me. She might have been old and she used too much perfume, but when she wanted to make you feel bad she had a way that was almost—well, God-like. I never remember feeling so completely destroyed. I almost started to cry until I remembered I was too old to do that anymore. I was sure I was doomed and decided maybe I better pray or something. I crawled into the front seat of the car and sat with my hands folded very tight and my eyes closed so hard that lights began to flash behind my eyelids.

But I couldn't pray like that very long before my mind started to wander. Besides, I didn't really know exactly what to say I was sorry for. I hadn't really hurt Dave. In fact he had hurt me more than I had him. Why was *I* out here anyway? It wasn't my fault. Why wasn't Dave out here instead of me? If he had changed places with me, everything would have been all right. It was that sunlight. I had been blinded, and no one cared! They wouldn't even let me change seats. It wasn't fair! Why did I always get punished? I didn't hurt Dave. He hurt me. I was almost blinded and now I was being punished for something I didn't do. It wasn't fair! It was not fair!

After church, Dave came out to the car while Grandma stopped to talk to the preacher. Making sure Grandma had her back turned, I took one look at Dave's smug little face and punched him square between the eyes.